DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 924 PS 030 000

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TITLE A Universal Good: Expanding Voluntary, Early Learning Opportunities for Illinois' Young Children.

INSTITUTION Voices for Illinois Children, Chicago.

SPONS AGENCY Carnegie Corp. of New York, NY.; Ford Foundation, New York, NY.; Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Kansas City, MO.; Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation, Chicago, IL.; W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, Chicago, IL.; David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Los Altos, CA.; Mott (C.S.) Foundation, Flint, MI.

PUB DATE 2001-11-00

NOTE 29p.; This report is made possible with funding from the Early Care and Education Collaborative coordinated by the Communications Consortium Media Center, Washington, DC. Also supported by Irving Harris Foundation.

AVAILABLE FROM Voices for Illinois Children, 208 South LaSalle Street, Suite 1490, Chicago, IL 60604-1103. Tel: 312-456-0600; Fax: 312-456-0088; e-mail: info@voices4kids.org; Web site: http://www.voices4kids.org.

PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; Child Caregivers; Child Development; Childhood Needs; Day Care; *Early Childhood Education; Early Experience; Educational Benefits; Educational Quality; School Readiness; State Action; *Young Children

IDENTIFIERS *Illinois

ABSTRACT

This report was written to stimulate discussion about the potential and need for expanding access to voluntary, high-quality early childhood care and education programs in Illinois. The report compiles 13 short articles pertaining to early learning as follows: (1) "Ready to Succeed: Preparing Children for School, and for Life"; (2) "Going 'Universal': Tackling Challenges, Taking Opportunities"; (3) "Growing Interest in Early Learning: A National as Well as a Statewide Phenomenon"; (4) "Studies Underscore Success: Cognitive, Social, Behavioral Benefits"; (5) "The Three-Legged Stool: Traditional Models of Early Learning"; (6) "Flexibility Breeds Stability: Blending the Strengths of Different Models"; (7) "The Turnover Turnstile: Poor Teacher Pay Undermines Staff Stability"; (8) "Shaping Staff Expectations: Who Should Teach Our Youngest Children?"; (9) "Setting Learning Standards: What, How Should We Teach 4-Year-Olds?"; (10) "Ensuring Accountability: Should We Hold a Yardstick to Kids, Programs?"; (11) "The Parental Piece: Moms, Dads, Communities Are Integral to Preschool Success"; (12) "Invest in Kids Now: Early Learning Pays Long-Term Dividends"; and (13) "A Shared Agenda: Giving Kids What They Need, When They Need It." (Contains 45 endnotes.) (EV)

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A Universal Good:

Expanding Voluntary, Early Learning Opportunities for Illinois' Young Children

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VOICES FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN

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This report, published in November 2001, was written to stimulate discussion about the potential and need for expanding access to voluntary, high-quality early childhood care and education programs, which lay a crucial foundation for the healthy cognitive, social and emotional development of children. To promote that discussion, and to help Illinois down the path toward "universal" access to voluntary early learning opportunities, we request that readers disseminate this report. Please feel free to make multiple copies.

About Voices for Illinois Children

Voices for Illinois Children is a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan group of child advocates who work with families, communities and policy-makers to ensure that all children grow up healthy, nurtured, safe and well-educated. Through policy analysis, public education and outreach, Voices generates support from civic, business and community leaders for cost-effective and practical proposals to improve the lives of Illinois children. Jerome Stermer is the president of Voices for Illinois Children and Lorraine Barba is the chair of its board of directors.

If you would like to provide feedback on this paper or learn more about early childhood care and education, please call Voices for Illinois Children at 312-516-5566 or e-mail Sean Noble at snoble@voices4kids.org.

If you would like to hold a forum about early learning opportunities and other issues that affect your community, please call Voices at 312-456-0600 for a free copy of our Community Forum **Discussion Guide**.

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Ready To Succeed

Preparing children for school, and for life

As they enter Connie Byerly's kindergarten classroom for the first time, children face certain expectations: They should be able to use paste and scissors, speak understandably, take turns at games and share toys. They should know their addresses, be able to write some letters of the alphabet and count to perhaps 10. But the Springfield teacher knows what else to expect from her brand-new pupils, too.

"They're just overwhelmed to be in such a large group. They have a hard time with who to focus on," Byerly says. Their period of adjustment typically doesn't last too long, as most of the 5-year-olds adapt quickly to their new surroundings and begin to thrive in the classroom. Still others continue to struggle. Often, these are children who have spent their early years in environments that offer very little mental stimulation or emotional support.

"So many of them will come and it's obvious they have never held a pair of scissors before. They never have held a pencil. If it's beyond nodding 'yes' and 'no,' they can't communicate," worries Byerly, an instructor for three decades. She rarely finds such problems among pupils who as 3- or 4-year-olds attended high-quality preschool or child care programs. "Even playing games, taking turns, there's a big difference," she says.

Springfield kindergarten teacher Connie Byerly works with her young students.

> "So many (children) will come and it's obvious they have never held a pair of scissors before. They never have held a pencil."
>
> Connie Byerly, Springfield kindergarten teacher

Byerly has found what study after study illustrates to be true: Learning begins at birth, and adults should start early in supporting children's learning. Good preKindergarten, Head Start, child care and other preschool programs – called "early learning opportunities" for purposes of this report – support parents' role as kids' first and most important teachers. And good initiatives can significantly increase children's readiness for school, helping them to succeed academically, thrive emotionally and excel in behavior.

Children with certain "at-risk" characteristics, such as those from low-income households or who have very limited English skills, can particularly benefit from early learning opportunities. Plus, research indicates the effects of early care and education can stretch even beyond classrooms and school years, including a greater likelihood that children will find satisfying jobs and avoid criminal activity.

Measured many ways, our state's commitment to early learning already appears strong. Discounting federal funding for Head Start programs, only four states spent more money

on preK efforts than Illinois did in 1998-99, and only two states served more preschool children than Illinois did.[1] Illinois' homegrown PreKindergarten Program for Children At Risk of Academic Failure enrolled eight times more children in fiscal 2001 than it did in fiscal 1987, its second year of existence.[2] Such highly regarded groups as the Education Commission of the States and the Council for Chief State School Officers recently selected the Illinois preK program for study in significant research projects.

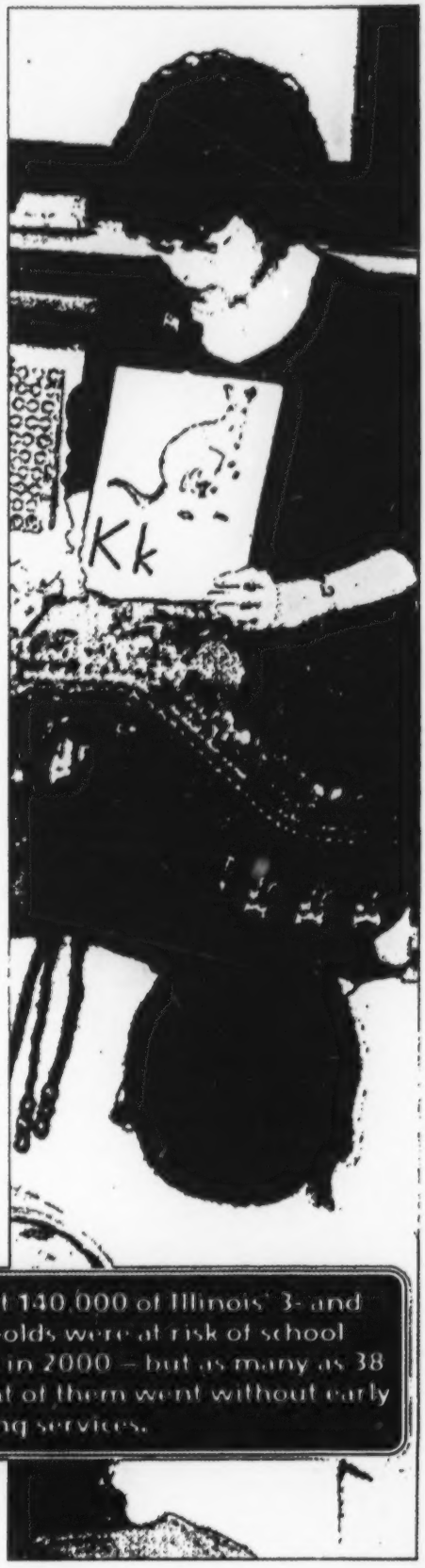
In the field of child care, Illinois during the late 1990s substantially boosted its subsidies to help low-income families pay for child care. Yet despite these successes, early education opportunities remain fairly limited in Illinois and across the United States; partly in consequence, national surveys indicate that as many as 35 percent of children entering kindergarten classrooms do so unready to learn.[3]

The underfunded federal Head Start program for low-income children serves only about half of eligible 4-year-olds nationwide, and only a fraction of eligible youngsters under age 4.[4] Illinois' preK program carries a statewide waiting list of more than 7,000 names,[5] a backlog so great that, in Chicago alone, another 9,925 children await simple screening for the program.[6] Using the preK and Head Start eligibility guidelines as a yardstick, state officials estimated that at least 140,000 of Illinois' 3- and 4-year-olds were at risk of school failure in fiscal year 2000 – but that as many as 38 percent of them went without those early learning services for which they were qualified.[7]

In surveying the families of more than 16,000 youngsters whose parents sought state-assisted child care during fiscal year 2000, authorities learned that 23 percent could find no openings in programs where they wanted to place their kids.[8] High tuition shuts plenty of those and other families out of many early care and education programs. "We will have parents come and say, 'I wanted my kids to go to nursery school, but I couldn't afford it,'" Byerly says.

That's particularly unfortunate, considering researchers agree that high-quality programs at day care centers and other sites can benefit youngsters much the same way as good, school-based initiatives. In addition, flexible child care often can help accommodate the schedules and needs of a growing number of working parents, helping to provide them with a range of educational choices for their children.

Altogether, Byerly cautions, Illinois' lack of widely accessible and affordable early learning opportunities "is creating the educational haves and have-nots." Children from working poor, minority and immigrant families too often wind up among the have-nots, even though studies repeatedly show that quality early education could make a positive difference in their lives.



At least 140,000 of Illinois' 3- and 4-year-olds were at risk of school failure in 2000 – but as many as 38 percent of them went without early learning services.

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Going 'Universal'

Tackling challenges, taking opportunities

Many factors limit children's access to preschool efforts, ranging from a lack of physical resources to high teacher turnover, from tight family finances to finite state and federal funding. But Illinois now is considering how to bridge such limitations. Gov. George Ryan has convened a task force to explore ways of extending voluntary, early learning opportunities to all 3- to 5-year-old children who are not yet in school and whose parents choose such services – a preschool approach known as creating "universal" accessibility.

"We want to develop a plan that will give all of our children every advantage in life," he said in forming the Governor's Task Force on Universal Access to Preschool, a group of child-development experts, educators, business and community and government leaders.

Families' options should include child care, transportation aid and educational programs that provide part-day, all-day and year-round services.

By Jan. 1, 2002, they must submit to the governor and Illinois General Assembly a five-year plan that lays out cost estimates and methods of phasing in universal preschool access. The task force faces a Herculean challenge that requires attention to myriad issues to ensure that good programs are available to all kids whose parents want them to benefit from early learning. Among the considerations are these critical and mutually dependent variables:

➔ **Quality.** Programs should be based upon developmentally appropriate standards that help foster childrens' social and behavioral growth as well as their academic maturation. Initiatives should emphasize the involvement of parents, who are children's first and most important teachers. And state leaders must determine not only staffing requirements for teachers and other care providers, but ways of compensating such professionals adequately and fairly to attract and retain the best instructors for our young children.

➔ **Affordability.** Just as public education is free to older children, preschool efforts should remain free of charge to guarantee maximum accessibility, especially for low-income families whose youngsters stand to gain the most from early learning opportunities. If fees are deemed necessary, they should be made as affordable as possible on a sliding scale that recognizes families' varying abilities to pay.

➔ **Flexibility.** Learning initiatives should meet the wide-ranging needs of both children and their parents. Families' options should include child care, transportation aid and educational programs that provide part-day, all-day and year-round services.

➔ **Accountability.** In determining the best ways of measuring preschool program success and perhaps pupils' school readiness, state leaders must avoid the possible damages of paper-and-pencil testing: developmentally inappropriate exams for young children and decision-making based solely on exam results. Educators should use more appropriate performance gauges to help shape and strengthen programs, as well as to assess individual children's needs.

STATE STORIES: Helping the neediest first

Plenty of studies show that at-risk children can gain the most from preschool. Not surprisingly, Illinois' PreKindergarten Program for Children At Risk of Academic Failure is one of many state initiatives that put a premium on serving such youngsters. In Texas, any school district with at least 15 homeless, language-minority or otherwise educationally disadvantaged kids must offer preK classes. Connecticut steers much of its preschool funding to areas where at least 40 percent of children come from low-income households. A North Carolina court ruled that the state has a constitutional obligation to provide school services to at-risk kids as young as 4 – one of several such court declarations from around the country.

Sources: Education for Four-Year-Olds: State Initiatives, by James Gallagher et al, FPG Child Development Center for Early Development and Learning, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; also, National Governors Association.

Growing Interest in Early Learning

A national as well as a statewide phenomenon

In autumn 2000, an Illinois Futures for Kids assembly recommended that the state help parents of young children "in every community" to know, understand and be able to choose among a range of options for quality early care and education by 2005. That goal set the tone for the governor's task force, whose creation the assembly also recommended. But Illinois is far from alone in weighing the need for expansion of early learning opportunities.

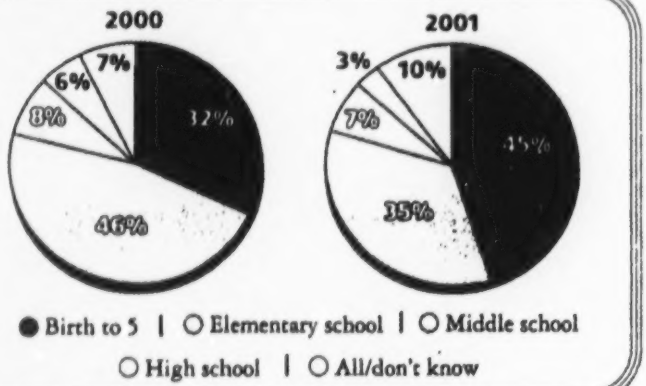
Although Georgia remains the only state to set aside the funding necessary to offer preschool "universally" to all its 4-year-olds, states such as New York and Oklahoma already are moving in the direction of universal accessibility. Across the nation during the 1998-99 school year, states spent nearly $1.7 billion on preschool initiatives for almost 725,000 kids – more than doubling both the amount of money they spent and the number of children they served seven years earlier.[9]

In 2000, the Education Commission of the States launched a campaign for improved, expanded early learning and care, pointing out the nation had fallen well short of the National Education Goals' 1990 vision of helping all children enter school ready to succeed within 10 years. The commission cited a nationwide survey in which kindergarten teachers reported that only about half their pupils made a smooth transition to formal schooling.[10]

Recognizing the Significance of Early Education

If we want to improve the learning experiences of children in Illinois, which time period is most important for investing public funds?

Source: Market Strategies, Inc. surveys of 600 Illinois voters in February 2000 and May 2001; margin of error +/- 4 percent for each survey.



As the White House arranged a summit on early learning in July 2001, the National Education Association called for the strengthening of early child care to help children have "a safe and healthy passage into kindergarten."[11] Meanwhile, the American Federation of Teachers urged the United States to extend voluntary, affordable learning opportunities to all 3- and 4-year-olds, based on the Head Start model.[12]

This increasing emphasis on early learning opportunities involves more than preparation for school, though; such initiatives help prepare youngsters for life. A growing body of research stresses this, and has focused a spotlight on the need to take advantage of the all-important, earliest years of children's brain development. In a landmark 2000 report called "From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development," a committee assembled by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine wrote:

> "From the time of conception to the first day of kindergarten, development proceeds at a pace exceeding that of any subsequent stage of life. Efforts to understand this process have revealed the myriad and remarkable accomplishments of the early childhood period, as well as the serious problems that confront some young children and their families long before school entry. A fundamental paradox exists and is unavoidable: Development in the early years is both highly robust and highly vulnerable. Although there have been long-standing debates about how much the early years really matter in the larger scheme of lifelong development, our conclusion is unequivocal: What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows."[13]

Illinoisans increasingly hear and agree with that message, according to a statewide poll conducted in May 2001. Asked to identify the most important age for developing a child's capacity to learn, 85 percent of respondents named an age younger than 6, reflecting a 7-point increase from a survey taken in February 2000. In the newest poll, 61 percent of people agreed "state government should do more to improve the learning experiences of very young children," up a significant 9 points. And 86 percent concurred "state spending on early childhood programs is truly an investment, because kids with better early childhood learning experiences do better in school, are more productive as adults and stay out of crime." That compares with 82 percent in the earlier poll.[14]

> "What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot ... because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows."
>
> – From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development"

Studies Underscore Success

Cognitive, social, behavioral benefits

These survey responses are not empty sentiments, judging from studies in Illinois and throughout the nation. In one, conducted by Georgia State University, educators evaluated the school readiness of children who had attended Georgia's preK program and ranked two-thirds of them as "good," "very good" or "extraordinarily good." In addition, Georgia kindergarten teachers rated 60 percent of former preK participants as better-prepared in early literacy skills than their peers who had not attended preschool.[15]

According to longitudinal research by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), 80 percent of students leaving Illinois' preK program in fiscal 2000 were judged average to above average in kindergarten readiness. That same year, about 75 percent to 85 percent of high school students who once attended Illinois' preK program were rated by their teachers as average to above average in behavior, and they posted a higher graduation rate than the state norm.[16] "These were kids who were once considered at-risk of failure," stresses Kay Henderson, who leads ISBE's early childhood education division. Many of the children came from impoverished or otherwise troubled homes.

The social and behavioral aspects of preschool — such as learning to interact properly with other children and adults — is at least as important to school readiness as having a grounding in the ABCs, child development experts say.

Other researchers, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Northern Illinois University, published their work in the Journal of the American Medical Association in May 2001. This Illinois-focused study tracked nearly 1,000 students from low-income families who participated in Chicago's Child-Parent Center program as preschoolers. It then measured their records against those of about 500 non-program youngsters from similar backgrounds. By age 5, the early-education pupils had recorded the equivalent of a 10-point IQ score increase, compared with their peers.[17]

Furthermore, the study revealed that, by age 18, former Child-Parent Center pupils were about one-third less likely to be arrested for juvenile crimes than their peers. Nearly half of the Child-Parent Center graduates

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Maria Bolaños helps out at El Valor's Guadalupe Reyes Children & Family Center in Chicago, where her 4-year-old son attends Head Start classes.

went on to finish high school, while only 38.5 percent of their non-program counterparts did so.

Still another of the nation's longest-running studies of early learning opportunities – focusing on the High/Scope Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Mich. – echoes those findings. It shows former preschool students were about 18 percent more likely to hold jobs, 16 percent more likely to be satisfied with their work and 14 percent less likely to require public financial assistance by age 19 than a study group of youths who didn't receive the same early childhood educational services.[18]

Such feedback about the social and behavioral facets of early learning opportunities is as encouraging to educators and care providers as it is to parents. Indeed, many experts consider those aspects to be as significant for children's development as the cognitive effects – the academic results – that early education can have. Learning to interact properly with other children and adults is at least as important to school readiness as having a grounding in the ABCs, many maintain. So, too, are the "regulatory" effects of early learning opportunities, which some call the development of "life skills" – skills ranging from sitting quietly during storytime to lining up for recess.

Chicago mom Maria Bolaños counts these among the biggest benefits she sees early education providing to children. "It makes them more independent; it gives them more security," says Bolaños, whose 4-year-old son, Eric, attends Head Start classes at El Valor's Guadalupe Reyes Children & Family Center in Chicago.

Bolaños often helps out at the center by reading to children and lending teachers a hand with projects. "Here, they stress routine," she says, adding that Eric responds well to routine. In fact, she now sees him washing his hands before meals and cleaning his plate of food without having to be told.

The Three-Legged Stool

Traditional models of early learning

The federally supported **Head Start** program that benefits Eric Bolaños is one of three basic models that traditionally comprise early care and education in the United States. The program began in 1965 as a way of helping low-income children, aged 3 to 5, get a head start on life. In addition to learning opportunities, it includes many medical, dental, counseling and other social services for youngsters.

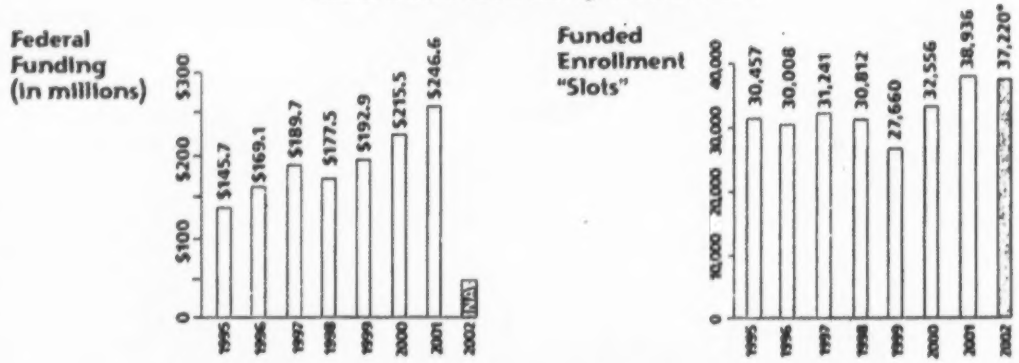
In the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, 2001, Head Start's Illinois efforts channeled $229.3 million toward assistance for more than 35,600 children (and its companion program, Early Head Start, spent $16.9 million on aid for more than 3,300 infants and toddlers). Eligibility for Head Start's voluntary, tuition-free classes and services hinges primarily upon low household income. [19]

Child care for very young kids – as young as 3 and 4 years old – cost an average of more than $6,900 in the Chicago area in 2000.

Forty-two states have their own preK programs, which comprise a second leg of the early-learning stool. While a few states simply allow school districts to extend "kindergarten" to 4-year-olds in public schools, several others supplement their Head Start dollars with state funding. Nearly three dozen states have developed their own, distinct programs,[20] including Illinois' effort, whose roots stretch back to a series of 1985 school-reform measures.

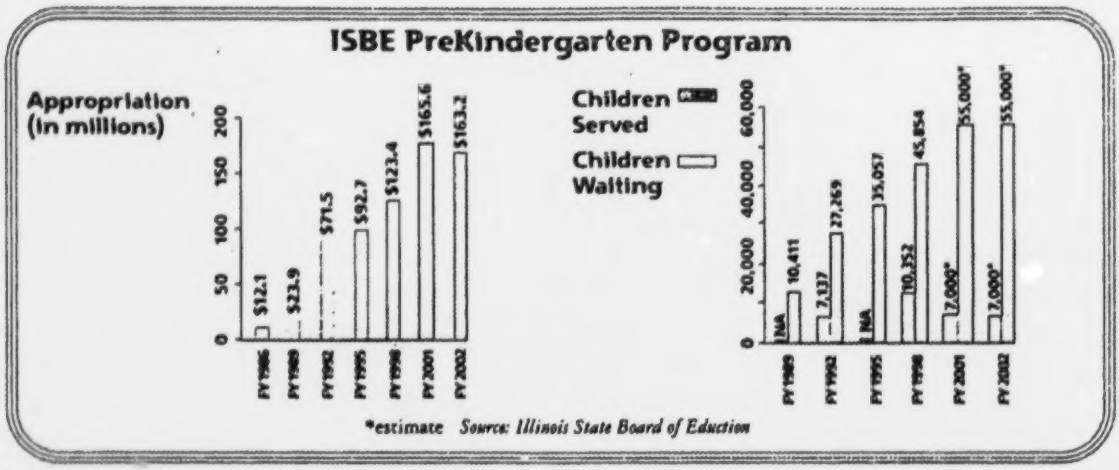
Much like Head Start, Illinois' **PreKindergarten Program for Children At Risk of Academic Failure** is voluntary and free of charge to parents. It, too, targets youngsters aged 3 to 5 who have not yet entered school, and its administrators expect to enroll about 55,000 children for fiscal 2002. The program makes Early Childhood Education Block Grant money available to individual school districts that would like to offer the program,

Head Start and Early Head Start



* estimate, Head Start only (Early Head Start estimate not available)

Source: Head Start Program Office of Family and Child Development, ACF Region V - Chicago

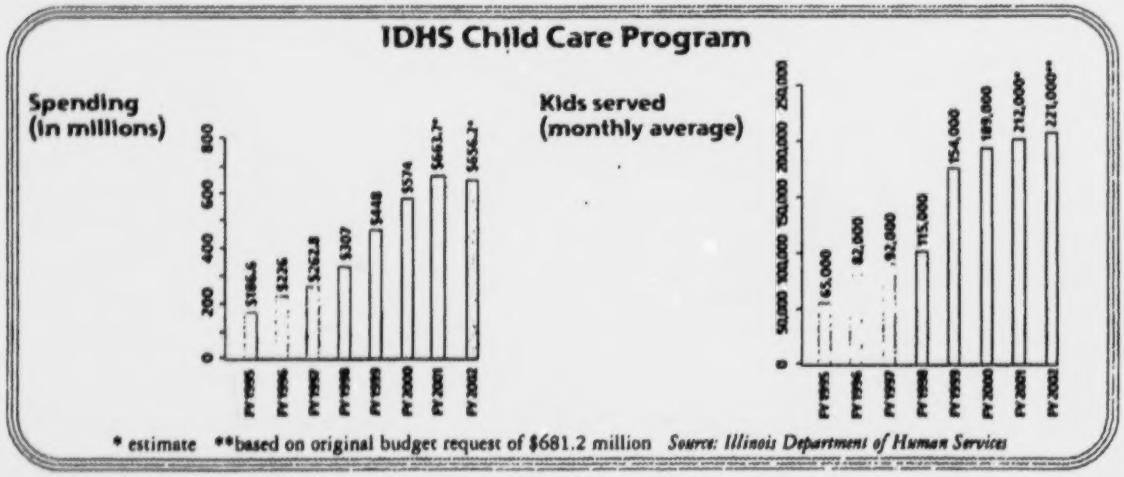


and other early-care providers can contract through school systems to do likewise. During the last academic year, Henderson says, nearly 500 school districts split the preK funds. In the Illinois State Board of Education's total fiscal 2002 budget of $6.2 billion, the grants should come to about $184.2 million; about $21 million of that amount is earmarked for programs serving infants and toddlers.[21] Some local school districts put up their own money to supplement limited state funding.

However, low income is only one of several eligibility factors that districts weigh in screening and considering children for enrollment in state-supported preK. The program aims for youngsters who risk failure "because of their home and community environment," and its broad definition of "risk" allows school systems to consider a wide range of factors threatening a child's potential for school success. Among them are chronic illness, incarceration of a parent or having teenaged parents.

Child care is the third major component of early learning opportunities for young children. It comes in many, varied forms, from simply sending a youngster to a neighbor's or relative's house after school to enrolling a tot in a highly structured, center-based program with daily lesson plans.

The Illinois Department of Human Services helps cover the costs of care for thousands of low-income families, and expects to spend about $656.2 million on care for more than 221,000 children during fiscal 2002. (In the previous fiscal year, more than 56,300 of such IDHS aid recipients were aged 3, 4 or 5.)[22] Unlike Head Start and Illinois' preK program, however, parents are charged co-payments for subsidized child care.



The often high costs of care make state subsidies absolutely critical to many working families that otherwise wouldn't be able to afford care for their children, especially as welfare-to-work efforts require more mothers and fathers to find jobs outside their homes. Indeed, the average annual cost of services at Chicago-area child care centers topped $5,300 in 2000, almost 30 percent more than the typical college student would have paid for a year's worth of school at a public university in Illinois the previous year.[33] But child care for very young children – as young as 3 and 4 years old – ran even higher, an average of more than $6,900.[34]

Subsidies help offset such costs to working families. Yet even state assistance only goes so far, and can disappear abruptly through a so-called "cliff effect" that actually punishes many parents' attempts at improving their self-sufficiency. For example, outdated eligibility rules allowed a single mother of two children to obtain subsidized care if she earned about $24,000 in 2001. But even a nickel-an-hour raise would nudge that mom into a slightly higher earnings bracket – just high enough to have to forfeit such state aid.

Not even caregivers themselves are exempt from such quandaries, said Jill Bradley, director for North Lawndale/Little Village programs at Chicago's Carole Robertson Center for Learning. She tells of an employee who came to her after her center announced modest pay raises for July 2001. "Keep the raise," the woman reluctantly told Bradley, noting that accepting the extra pay would automatically strip her of eligibility for her own child's care subsidy.

Head Start, the state's preK initiative and child care efforts are distinct programs, and some people might view them as serving different purposes. But such programs – if they're of high quality – share the goal of helping to improve children's lot in life. Providers sometimes are able to blend two or all three of them under a single roof to offer families greater scheduling flexibility and a wider range of learning opportunities from which to choose.

Meaningful expansion of such opportunities in Illinois might not necessitate the creation of an entirely new program. However, it does hinge upon the inclusion of all three models and helping them to work together in ways that assist and make sense to families and local communities, says Tom Layman, executive director of the Chicago Metro Association for the Education of Young Children. "Those systems should 'talk' to each other," he says. "The concept of combining child care and education, I think, has a lot of potential."

State child care subsidies only go so far, and can disappear abruptly through a "cliff effect" that actually punishes many parents' attempts at improving their self-sufficiency.

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Flexibility Breeds Stability

Blending the strengths of different models

The potential that Layman mentions could benefit both children and parents, like Veronica Alba and her 4-year-old daughter, Michelle. When Alba enrolled Michelle in the Guadalupe Reyes center's Head Start program, its limited, all-day classes were full. That meant putting the girl in a half-day program and setting aside mom's plans of getting a job; someone had to watch Michelle before and after classes, and costly child care could have erased much of Alba's earnings.

> "We'd better figure out where the kids are and make where they are a good educational experience."
>
> Tom Layman, executive director, Chicago Metro AEYC

While the Guadalupe Reyes center's programs offer no on-site day care for families such as the Albas, some other facilities do. The Educare center, operated by the Ounce of Prevention Fund on Chicago's south side, also houses Head Start, Early Head Start and state-supported preK efforts. Thus, an Educare mom can drop off her Head Start youngster as early as 6 a.m., go to work and pick the child up as late as 7 p.m. – increasingly important flexibility, considering most of Illinois' preK and Head Start programs run for only two to three hours daily, which doesn't realistically fit many families' needs.

More than 60 percent of American moms with children under age 6 are part of the work force, almost double the level recorded in 1970;[25] reforms are pushing that figure higher still. The Illinois Department of Human Services reports that most parents seeking child care referrals in fiscal year 2000 wanted full-time, center-based or home care for their youngsters, and that requests for care with "non-traditional" hours – such as evening, overnight and even weekends – were on the rise.[26] In addition to worrying about programs' daily and weekly hours of operation, parents must consider their annual schedules. Classes or child care efforts that run for only the traditional academic year of nine months still leave three months a year during which working parents must secure care for their youngsters.

Plus, families' transportation requirements must be considered. Not all parents own or have access to cars, and others' work schedules frustrate easy transportation of their children to and from programs. This is particularly true in rural regions, where programs are fewer and thus located farther apart than in urban areas. Illinois' state-supported preK providers can apply for transportation aid, but many do not; those who do so say they usually can't secure enough aid to cover their costs.

A lack of transportation – like programs' limited hours – often limits parents to choosing programs by convenience rather than by quality. In fact, about 330,000 of Illinois' preschool-aged children are cared for in informal settings with no required staff qualifications or minimum standards for health and safety,[27] most often the homes of neighbors or relatives. Experts agree that putting very young children on school buses is not ideal, and that transition points for children – travel between home and preK site, between one preK site and child care – should be kept to an absolute minimum. However, in extreme cases, transportation aid might spell the difference between obtaining and missing an early education.

Some critics point out that Illinois' public schools lack the physical resources – from

STATE STORIES: Collaboration and coordination

Schools' work with Head Start and child care providers is an integral part of New York's universal preK drive. That state has established a public-private partnership by mandating that at least 10 percent of a school district's preK funding be spent in collaboration with other early-learning agencies. In reality, New York preschool programs have far exceeded that goal and have expanded to include counseling and other social services to students and their families. The state is phasing in its preK program, through the 2002-03 school year.

Source: Education for Four-Year-Olds: State Initiatives, by James Gallagher et al, FPG Child Development Center for Early Development and Learning, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

classroom space to buses – to significantly expand preK offerings. Agreed, says Layman. "So we'd better figure out where the kids are and make where they are a good educational experience," he says. That means recognition that preschool programs based at child care centers and sites other than public schools form an integral part of Illinois' early-learning mix – and must play an important role in expansion efforts.

Scattered throughout communities, such sites often provide families with greater access to early learning opportunities than they'd find if looking only at programs limited to school buildings. Such sites shouldn't have to contract through local school districts for preK funding, but should be able to go to the state directly for their classroom aid.

Making early learning opportunities accessible to all 3- and 4-year-olds will require flexibility and a blending of initiatives to meet families' varying needs – from programs that run part day and part year to those covering full school days or work days and the entire, 12-month year. In some cases, transportation assistance also can help early learning programs better meet families' needs and allow them greater choices. Providing families with a range of scheduling options can help to foster a stability that is vitally important not only to working parents but to children, as well.

The Turnover Turnstile

Poor teacher pay undermines staff stability

Instability of all kinds can hamper even the best early learning efforts. Often, it results from a parent's varying work schedule, which bounces a youngster from one care setting to another as the adult seeks services to fit his or her dicey work hours or limited transportation options. "Because the kids don't have a firm schedule, they have piecemeal child care," says John Roope, director of family education for Quincy's Chaddock Child & Family Center.

"We get kids like that and we can see a documentable difference between the child's behavior when they are in consistent, quality child care and when they are in piecemeal (care)," Roope says. Children in the latter group are much more angry, compulsive and distrustful than their peers receiving more stable care, he says.

Quincy child care administrator John Roope says children benefit from consistent, quality care.

Yet moving frequently among physical settings isn't the only form of inconsistency that's harmful to kids; so, too, is moving frequently from one teacher to another, from one caregiver to another. "One of the main ingredients of high-quality child care is stable relationships between caregivers and children," Roope says.

> "One of the main ingredients of high-quality child care is stable relationships between caregivers and children."
>
> John Roope, director of family education for Chaddock Child & Family Center, Quincy

Unfortunately, staff instability is a dubious benchmark of Illinois' early childhood efforts, driven primarily by pay inequities that create "turnstile teaching," says Teri Talan. She is executive director of the Evanston Day Nursery and works with the Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National-Louis University in Wheeling.

Talan helped research and write an important, June 2001 study that illustrates the revolving-door phenomenon that plagues early-learning programs. It shows the average teacher in Illinois' subsidized child-care programs earns about $8.21 an hour – not much, especially compared with the $12.32 hourly wages of a typical Head Start teacher. Both figures pale next to the hourly earnings of an instructor in Illinois' preK program for at-risk kids: $20.41.[28]

Assistant teachers in these programs fare even worse. It's no surprise, then, to find that turnover among assistant instructors has soared to an average of 24 percent annually. Every year on average, the staffs of Illinois' Head Start and state-supported preK classes

change by 12 percent and 7 percent, respectively. At some sites, turnover figures are triple that level or higher.

The problem is that many of these programs' underpaid and underappreciated teachers are – understandably – fleeing for higher wages. Child care instructors often look for Head Start work, while Head Start teachers seek positions in preK classrooms. And teachers from all these early-learning programs clamor for employment in the grade K-12 school world, where instructors earned a statewide average of $45,700 in fiscal 2000,[29] more than double the average Head Start teacher's pay.

Many would-be instructors avoid the education field and its prospect of poor compensation altogether, and some veteran teachers leave classrooms for less stressful and better-paying jobs in retail or other work. All too often, it seems, classrooms and early-care settings lose some of their best and most-experienced teachers.

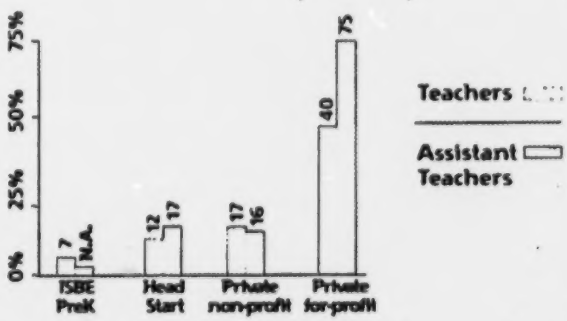
Especially insulting to early childhood instructors is the fact that many perform essentially the same work but at drastically different levels of compensation, Talan says. "You look at it and say, 'That's too bad for the teachers.' But from the point of view of the kids, it's so arbitrary," she says.

The existing system consigns many children – often, those from low-income, working families – to the care of the least-qualified and least-experienced teachers. In this arrangement, Talan says, "You're creating a model that's really hurtful to children." Better, fairer pay based on education and specialized training is absolutely necessary to attract good instructors and caregivers to early learning programs, and is a key to keeping them there, she says.

Teacher Turnover

Annual turnover rates for preschool, child care teachers and their assistants

Source: Who's Caring for the Kids?, National-Louis University



Shaping Staff Expectations

Who should teach our youngest children?

Just as early childhood instructors and caregivers expect fair pay, it's natural that parents, taxpayers and state leaders have expectations of teachers and caregivers. Staff requirements such as class sizes, adult-to-child ratios and minimum teacher credentials pose an important quality control in early learning programs and must be considered in any expansion initiative.

Head Start classes allow no more than 10 youngsters per instructor. Illinois' state-supported preK classes have a similar rule, allowing a maximum class size of 20 (with two adults in the room). Adult-to-child ratios vary among Illinois child care settings, although in the 3- to 4-year-old age group, state licensing officials stick to guidelines much like Head Start's.

Among early learning efforts, the state-aided preK program poses the strictest standards for teacher preparation. Rules for Head Start instructors are less rigid and, in child care programs, minimum staff requirements vary widely but are generally even less strict. In fact, state-licensed "family" child care providers – who can care for three or more unrelated children in home settings – need only be 18 years old and pass criminal background and abuse-and-neglect checks.

Well-trained professionals can stimulate a child's intellectual, behavioral and social growth, says Courtney Small, a Chicago early childhood center administrator.

> Expanding families' access to preschool shouldn't limit their options. Greater access to voluntary programs should provide families with more choices about settings and instructors and caregivers.

While such family care providers must complete some annual training, they face no other educational prerequisites. And even among more formal, center-based child care settings, fewer than one in five preschoolers attends a program that requires teachers to have at least a bachelor's degree and teaching credential.[10]

Many factors, from convenience to price tags, prompt thousands of families to put their youngsters in care with low or no staff standards. Certainly, higher quality often comes at a sharply higher price. Yet many parents are simply more comfortable leaving their young children in the care of people they already know and trust, such as a relative or neighbor, rather than with a new teacher or caregiver. Expanding families' access to preschool opportunities is not meant to limit such options; on the contrary, greater access to voluntary programs should provide families with more choices about settings and instructors and caregivers – all of high quality.

"A lot of times, families resort to great-grandma for care," explains Courtney Small, administrator for the Ounce of Prevention Fund's Educare Center. "She's warm and loving, but she might not always provide the best learning environment." Professionals trained in early childhood

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care and development can quickly build a trusting relationship with both parents and their youngsters, she said – and they're well-equipped to help stimulate kids' cognitive, behavioral and social growth.

Education experts and policy-makers debate whether and how best to adjust credential requirements for such professionals. Some fear mandating teaching certificates of all early childhood instructors, pointing out that grade K-12 schools with better-paying jobs seem to hire most certified teachers right out of college. Meanwhile, certification could take a year or longer for a current early-childhood teacher – even one who already holds a master's degree and several years of experience. Other experts say that phasing in new certification requirements – at least for programs' "lead" teachers – is the only way to truly ensure staff quality.

It's not unreasonable to expect the minimum of a bachelor's degree from all early childhood teachers and caregivers in charge of programs' curricula,

Almost everyone agrees preparing instructors with strong college educations and classroom experience – and occasional re-training – is essential to preschool expansion.

Talan says, to ensure that every group of children is couched by such educators' guidance. But achieving such a standard could pose significant new costs of its own. If bachelor's degrees were required of all early learning instructors, the college and university programs that train them would have to increase their teaching staffs by 76 percent, according to a national survey of higher-education institutions.[31]

Almost everyone interested in preschool programs agrees that preparing instructors with strong college educations and classroom experience – and occasional re-training, once they're on the job – is essential to expanding early learning efforts.

Setting Learning Standards

What, how should we teach 4-year-olds?

Detailed, weekly lesson plans are posted on the classroom wall at North Avenue Day Nursery on Chicago's northwest side. This week's theme: "A farm is a piece of land, used to raise crops or animals." Day by day, the lessons unfold, starting Monday morning as the instructor asks youngsters what they know about farms and whether they've ever visited any. Children then match plastic farm animals with pictures of the real thing, and they study some farm-related books. Next, each pupil assumes an animal identity through "moos" and "baas" and clucking, scratching at the ground or pretending to eat hay.

It's no accident that the children are enjoying themselves and each other, says preschool Program

B.J. White (center), program co-director of the North Avenue Day Nursery in Chicago, enjoys a hay ride with a teacher and young students.

STATE STORIES: Novel funding, oversight

A national leader in the universal preschool movement, Georgia took several bold steps as it developed its program in the early 1990s. The state established a lottery exclusively for education funding, including expansion of its pilot preschool effort. And in 1995, then-Gov. Zell Miller established Georgia's Office of School Readiness – separate from the state's department of education – to oversee the early-learning push. The OSR contracts with public schools, Head Start and private providers to offer preschool classes.

Source: Education for Four-Year-Olds: State Initiatives, by James Gallagher et al, FPG Child Development Center for Early Development and Learning, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Co-Director B.J. White. "Deeper learning happens when you're having a good time, you're interested ... when it's meaningful," she explains.

Quality teachers and caregivers generally deliver quality education. Well-developed guidelines from outside the classroom can help, if they're neither so rigid that they shackle instructors' creativity nor so loose that they provide no practical direction at all. Such groups as the American Federation of Teachers say Head Start performance standards form a good basis for consideration in "universal" preschool efforts, and Illinois' discussion of expanding preschool access coincides with the Illinois State Board of Education's development of "early learning standards" for children in state-supported preK classes.

A statewide team of educators wrote these draft standards, which include benchmarks for gauging children's social and emotional development. The remaining guidelines complement the standards that the state board adopted for elementary, middle and high schools in 1997; from math to science to language arts, the preK draft covers the same seven subjects as the standards that guide education for K-12 students in Illinois.

The preK guidelines are being used on a pilot basis at dozens of schools statewide in 2001-02, and should be finalized by the following academic year. Examples of the standards, including their "benchmarks" for application, include:

- "Perform effectively as a member of a group" through cooperative, group play.
- "Apply reading strategies to improve understanding and fluency" by predicting what will happen next in a story, using pictures and story content for guidance.
- "Know and apply the concepts that describe the features and process of the earth and its resources" by using "common weather-related vocabulary (e.g. rainy, snowy, sunny, windy)."[11]

Ensuring Accountability

Should we hold a yardstick to kids, programs?

The state board of education developed the Illinois Standards Achievement Tests to measure students' progress toward learning standards for older children. However, most educators agree it would be a serious mistake to do likewise in the case of preK pupils, who generally are not ready for pen-and-paper exams. "I don't put a lot of credibility in testing 3- and 4-year-olds," says Marvin Edwards,

> "I don't put a lot of credibility in testing 3- and 4-year-olds."
>
> – Marvin Edwards, Elgin school superintendent

chief administrator of Elgin School District U46 and the 1998 Illinois Superintendent of the Year. "It's too inconclusive; children change too much and too quickly at that level."

Educators such as Edwards concur that "school readiness" can be tough to define, but even tougher to quantify in a particular child through any one-size-fits-all assessment. The National Association for the Education of Young Children cautions that, "Because learning does not occur in a rigid sequence of skill acquisition and because wide variability is normal, it is inappropriate to determine school entry on the basis of acquiring a limited set of skills and abilities."[3]

Given all these warnings, can children's progress through a preK program be safely and adequately checked? Yes, if using a developmentally appropriate yardstick such as the "Work Sampling" system, says ISBE's Kay Henderson. The brainchild of former University of Michigan Professor Samuel Meisels, Work Sampling involves tracking youngsters' achievements through portfolio collections of their artwork and writing, visits with parents and other measures. Meisels is the new president of Chicago's Erikson Institute, a graduate school specializing in early child-development education, and state school officials are working with him to "customize" his assessment system for Illinois' use, Henderson says. Illinois' version of Work Sampling could dovetail with Head Start performance standards, she adds.

Such assessments can best be used for instructors and parents to track individual youngsters' progress, many educators say. But, they add, ensuring the accountability of expanded, government-supported preschool efforts might have to take other forms.

For example, Henderson says the state board carefully scrutinizes grant applications for Illinois preK programs, compiles annual reports on data collected from grantees and submits triennial reports to the General Assembly about such long-term measures as the graduation rates and standardized exam scores of older, former preK students. In addition, 20 consultants for the state board try to visit each grant site at least once every three years, concentrating particularly upon new programs, Henderson says.

Several of the state board's expectations of preK grant recipients are based upon

Elgin Superintendent Marvin Edwards cautions that educators must be careful in trying to gauge young children's "school readiness."

> Only 3.4 percent of Illinois' state-licensed child care centers and homes were accredited in 2000.

accreditation standards assembled by the National Association for the Education of Young Children – just one of several early-learning groups that have developed nationally respected accrediting rules. An early-learning center that earns accreditation not only guarantees higher quality of care than that offered by many of its counterparts, it helps to slow the "turnstile teaching" phenomenon. Turnover of instructors in accredited programs is 8 percent less than that of programs lacking accreditation, and that gap widens to 13 percentage points among assistant teachers.[34]

Startlingly, though, only 3.4 percent of Illinois' state-licensed child care centers and homes were accredited in 2000.[35] The discussion of preschool expansion offers a good opportunity for Illinois to emphasize the clear benefits of accreditation for early-learning programs. And expansion of preschool access should include not only thoughtful development of learning standards for young children, but age-appropriate methods of tracking children's achievements and of ensuring program accountability – methods that do not strap kids with inappropriate expectations.

The Parental Piece

Moms, dads, communities are integral to preschool success

The bright, cheery waiting room inside Educare's front door is well-stocked for children's learning and enjoyment. Tables hold puzzles of large, wooden pieces. Puppets wait on a rack for youngsters to give them life, and a piano rests against a nearby wall. Above it, on bulletin boards, are tacked goodies for older visitors. One posting announces "male-involvement parenting classes" for dads, stepfathers, uncles and grandfathers. Another lists "31 things to do with your kids that don't cost a lot of money," from planting flowers to washing the car to discussing the future.

The best learning standards and highest-quality teachers can help provide young children with a good education, but they're ineffective without parents. Supportive moms, dads and guardians are essential for the success of early-learning efforts because parents are children's first and most important teachers. That's why programs such as Head Start mandate some meaningful parental involvement in their youngsters' education.

Involvement can take many forms, ranging from structured parent-teacher meetings to more informal classroom visits, volunteering to help with projects outside of class time or simply sitting down at night for at-home reading with children. Chicago's Child-Parent Center programs require moms and dads to participate in their kids' education, and the center also helps parents to arrange medical care and social services.[36] While kids play and learn at Peoria's Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Center, their parents can benefit from job-training classes, nutritional and GED preparation courses and a host of other services.[37]

"We believe you have to raise the whole community, families as well as children," says Martha Zurita, who focuses on Latino community needs in her policy work at Chicago-based Project Impact. Zurita also has directed policy work for El Valor, which sponsors programs on parenting skills,

> Supportive moms and dads are essential for the success of early-learning efforts because parents are children's first and most important teachers.

STATE STORIES: Local leadership valued

Community Partnership Councils of local parents, social-service providers and others are responsible for developing preschool plans and overseeing their implementation in **Massachusetts.** Similar school-readiness councils in **Connecticut** help preschool programs to address the academic and social needs of their pupils. **New York** school district superintendents must appoint policy advisory boards to assist in governing preschool efforts, and members range from teachers and parents to civic leaders and child care providers.

Source: National Governors Association

English as Second Language classes for Spanish-speaking moms and dads and a host of other services that foster the well-being of entire families. After all, if it's good for families, it's good for kids.

El Valor mom Maria Bolaños agrees, and adds that good preschool initiatives do not strip parents or communities of local educational decisions, but provide them with greater choices – and a say in program offerings. "Programs should meet the needs of the community and adapt to the needs of the community, rather than the other way around," Bolaños says.

That's why expansion of early learning efforts should involve not only parents but entire communities. Several states have seated local committees of parents, civic and business leaders and many other people to help plan preschool efforts. To ensure its own preschool expansion is truly responsive to local needs and desires, Illinois, too, must involve communities in the design of early learning programs.

> "Programs should meet the needs of the community and adapt to the needs of the community, rather than the other way around."
>
> – Maria Bolanos, Chicago mom

Invest in Kids Now

Early learning pays long-term dividends

In addition, Illinois should consider taking up another tool that Georgia and other states have used in expanding preschool efforts: establishment of a special office for oversight of early-learning programs and coordination of their various funding streams. This office could report directly to the governor and should remain separate from – but work in tandem with – the Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Department of Human Services and Head Start. Far from creating a new bureaucracy, such a move could help to streamline the state's early learning push, and represents just one big-picture investment Illinois should make.

"It is far easier to build strong children than to repair broken men," Frederick Douglass wisely observed. It's also far cheaper, from a big-picture view of education and its value to society.

Some people might argue Illinois' finances are too shaky to support far-reaching preschool expansion. But the benefits of early learning are too great to

avoid such a move, according to studies like that of low-income children who attended the High/Scope Perry Pre-school in Ypsilanti, Mich. during the 1960s.

Scholars spent years recording how less likely, compared with peers, the pupils were to be held back a grade or to need expensive special-education services, how less likely they were to commit crimes or to require welfare assistance as adults. Altogether, researchers determined, the High/Scope Perry program cost about $12,000 per year per child, in 1995 dollars – but it eventually accrued benefits estimated at $108,000 per youngster, based on such benefits as crime prevention.[38]

The authors of the latest Chicago Child-Parent Center study recently conducted a similar analysis, balancing that program's costs with its short- and long-term benefits for participating children, their families and society. Researchers determined that, for every dollar invested in that preschool effort, participants and society realized a return of more than $7 in benefits and savings.[39]

As noted earlier, few states spend more on early learning than Illinois, and even fewer serve more preschool children than the Prairie State does. Recently, Illinois lawmakers boosted Early Childhood Education Block Grants to $184.2 million for fiscal 2002, up $4 million from the previous year. However, that 2.2 percent growth rate reflects the smallest increase in the program's 16-year history; because the hike essentially covers cost-of-living pay raises for instructors, preK enrollment won't even be able to grow beyond the previous year's 55,000-student mark. In addition, after years of significant progress, state subsidies approved for child care in fiscal 2002 are actually down about $7.5 million from the previous year's levels.

Long-term studies show the societal benefits of preschool – lower crime and welfare payments, higher worker productivity – pay for its costs many times over.

The Illinois State Board of Education has identified early childhood learning as "one of four priority areas for educational leadership in Illinois." It has declared the state must "identify what all children need in order to achieve academic success by the end of grade 3 and, in partnership, build appropriate and comprehensive early learning programs and services."[40]

Nonetheless, while 35 percent of Illinois children under age 18 are younger than 6, the state earmarked only 3 percent of its fiscal 2001 ISBE budget for early childhood programs.[41] In fact, while the state-supported preK program spent an average of $2,654 on each of its pupils' learning in fiscal 2000,[42] Illinois laid out an average of $6,681 per student enrolled in public elementary, middle and high schools.[43] In fact, the state set a minimum, "foundation" funding level of $4,325 per K-12 student that year – a financial guarantee it doesn't make to children in its grant-funded, preK program.

"We're a funny society," says Head Start founder Edward Zigler of Yale University. "The minute a kid turns 5 and goes to kindergarten, this country is willing to spend an average of $5,700 a year on him all the way through 12th grade. But the years from birth to 5, which are so critical to get a kid ready for school, we spend next to nothing."[44]

A Clear Investment in Children, Society

Through their ongoing study of children who entered Chicago's Child-Parent Center preschools in 1985, researchers have projected the resulting benefits a CPC pupil could realize in extra lifetime earnings – and the long-range savings that schools, crime victims and the justice system could reap as well.

$6,730	One-year program cost for one child
$692	Grade retention savings for schools
$4,180	Special education savings for schools
$6,127	Savings for would-be crime victims
$7,130	Savings for criminal justice system
$20,157	Extra lifetime earnings for CPC child

Source: Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Center Program, Arthur Reynolds et al., University of Wisconsin-Madison and Northern Illinois University, June 2001

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Setting up its own, in-house care center for employees' children wasn't a cheap or easy project for The Northern Trust Co. to tackle in 1990. Yet Bill Setterstrom said bank officials recognized that three-quarters of their workforce fell into the prime child-bearing and child–rearing ages of about 18-40. Child care options were very limited for many of those workers headed to their jobs in downtown Chicago.

"We had a built-in market, and we sensed their strains and pressures," said Setterstrom, senior vice president for human resources. So, Northern Trust set aside learning space for about 80 kids, hired some instructors – and happily watched the results.

There are no longitudinal studies to prove Northern Trust's program has prepared children well for kindergarten or helped to recruit or retain bank employees, Setterstrom acknowledged. But through conversation after conversation with satisfied workers, he said, "I know that it has happened." In addition, the bank enjoys a "halo effect," Setterstrom said: a "broad recognition within the business community as an organization and an institution that cares about its people." Bolstering preschool is not only good for kids, it's good for business.

In 2000, Illinois spent an average of $6,681 on the education of each grade K-12 student – but only $2,654 per PreK pupil.

A Shared Agenda

Giving kids what they need, when they need it

Expanding preschool services to provide "universal" accessibility seems an enormously complicated task. Determining the proper funding, structure and oversight appears mind-boggling. But the main goal is simple enough, says Margie Wallen, a longtime children's advocate at the Chicago-based Kids Public Education and Policy Project who now staffs the Governor's Task Force on Universal Access to Preschool.

"It's all about giving children the right amount of what they need, at the time they need it," Wallen says. More than enough research already has illustrated what youngsters need: high-quality programs that are affordable and flexible enough to guarantee all families' access. Still other studies have underscored the period of time kids need such services – before they reach kindergarten age.

It's up to all of us as parents and educators, state officials, business and civic leaders and communities of all kinds, to ensure such vital information is put to good use, and now. It is time to heed the call of the national "Neurons to Neighborhoods" team, which recently wrote that:

> ➜ "In a highly pluralistic society that is experiencing dramatic economic and social change ... the development of children must be viewed as a matter of intense concern for both their parents and for the nation as a whole ... The time has come to stop blaming parents, communities, business, and government, and to shape a shared agenda to ensure both a rewarding childhood and a promising future for all children."[45]

Now is the time for Illinois to renew its commitment to children's early care and education. Now is the time for us to lift up our youngest, most vulnerable residents, who stand to gain so much from fresh attention to preschool efforts – and who stand to lose so much if we fail them.

"We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life," said Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean-born winner of the 1945 Nobel Prize in literature. "Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot ... To him, we cannot answer 'Tomorrow.' His name is 'Today.'"

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Acknowledgements

This report was written by Sean Noble, senior policy associate at Voices for Illinois Children.

We extend our gratitude to a number of people who helped greatly with this report: Margie Wallen, Kay Henderson, Tom Layman, Teri Talan, Sara Slaughter, Sessy Nyman, Nancy Shier, Gina Ruther, Connie Byerly, Marvin Edwards, John Roope, Jill Bradley, Judith Deane, Bill Hinrichs, Linda Saterfield, Rick Peterson and Mike Burke. Special thanks to Steve Koll, B.J. White and the staff of North Avenue Day Nursery; Martha Zurita, Maria Bolaños, Veronica Alba and the parents and staff of Guadalupe Reyes Center; and Courtney Small, MaryJane Chainski, Kathleen Alford and the staff of Educare Center. Thanks to Jerry Stermer, Kim Fitzgerald, Julie Zasadny and Belia Ortega of Voices for Illinois Children for their help as well.

This report is made possible with funding from the Early Care and Education Collaborative, a project to spread messages about early childhood issues coordinated by the Communications Consortium Media Center in Washington, D.C. The Collaborative is funded by Carnegie Corp. of New York, The Ford Foundation, The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and The David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Thanks also to the Irving Harris Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation for their support.

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